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Horton Interview

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7 September 1984

# 'Zealotry' called CIA crimp

By CLARK T. IRWIN JR.
Staff Writer

American policy in Central America is being decided in an atmosphere where White House "zealotry" and "very strong ideological clamps" prevent full discussion of options, a former Central Intelligence Agency officer said Thursday in Portland.

In his first interview since resigning as Latin American specialist on the National Intelligence Council in May, John R. Horton told the Press Herald that "Where there's a strong political feeling in the administration, there's pressure to skew intelligence estimates."

Horton was interviewed at the home of his son, lawyer Mark Horton, before a talk for the World Affairs Council of Maine.

Despite his resignation, Horton said he has no policy fight with the current administration.

"I think our broad policy in Central America is completely correct," he said, describing that policy as supporting a restoration of democracy and civilian government in El Salvador, resisting rebels supported by Nicaragua and Cuba and "opposing the attempt of the Sandinistas (the Nicaraguan revolutionary junta) to close their society up completely."

His objection, he explained, is to political pressures for intelligence officers to massage their "national intelligence estimates" to conform to political goals and the "inferior quality of discussions" resulting from the quelching of some points of view.

CIA Director William Casey called Horton out of eight years of retirement last year to help prepare intelligence appraisals of Latin American countries for the National Intelligence Council. The council's members represent the CIA, the State Department, the Defense Intelligence Agency and the armed forces.

As chairman of the team doing Latin American estimates, Horton gave Casey an estimate on the political, economic, military and diplomatic strength and capabilities of a major Latin American country important to U.S. policy concerns.

But the CIA director "wanted the estimate to come out a certain way" to strengthen the case for administration policy, Horton said, "and kept constant pressure on me to redo it."

"I refused to do it, so he finally had the thing rewritten over my dead body, so to speak," at which point Horton resigned.

That experience, he added, is not typical of the estimating process, which he believes is producing more and better readings than during the Carter administration.

The more general concern, he said, is that incomplete discussion of options for carrying out policy could lead to decisions that will eventually harm the country's intelligence services.

For example, he said, "It's no secret" that Cuba and Nicaragua are supplying arms, communications assistance and espionage data to the leftist rebels in El Salvador.

Since "Interdiction (military attempts to cut support) hasn't worked and can't work," and since no one is seriously proposing to remove the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua forcibly, Horton argued, it might be prudent to discuss offering Nicaragua a deal of reduced pressure if they stop supporting the Salvadoran revolutionaries.

But Casey's final vote at National Foreign Intelligence Board meetings — this being a group which reviews the National Intelligence Council's estimates — and "constant crunching back and forth" between the administration and "pragmatic people" at the State Department tends to suppress such discussion, Horton said.

On the administration side, he said, there is a group of "very bright people" including U.N. Ambassador Jean Kirkpatrick, Casey and Undersecretary of Defense Fred Ikle, "who are either against any type of compromise with the Sandinistas, or if not against it, suspicious that State can't handle it.

"There's a real distrust of the State Department," Horton said, "this feeling in the administration that 'State's soft.' "

Aside from the risk of the country's being given flawed policy decisions because of unexamined options, Horton said, there's the "institutional risk" that the CIA will be left holding the bag.

"At some point," he continued, "Reagan and Casey are going to be in some other world or retired from public life. If any cans get hung around anyone's neck for Central America, it won't be Reagan's or Casey's — it's going to be the CIA's."

That could lead to a repeat of the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam backlash against the agency and again impair the country's ability to supply its decision-makers with the best intelligence information and analysis possible, Horton fears.

A registered Democrat, Horton also said, "I want to be fair about this thing. . . . It's not just this administration."

When the Sandinistas seized power in Nicaragua in 1979, he said, President Carter's National Securi-

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ty Council decided to seek continued economic aid and amiable relations in hopes that the Sandinistas might be kept out of a "marriage" with Cuba and the Soviet Union.

"It was worth trying," Horton said, but the CIA was even then reporting the Sandinistas were seeking "very close ties" with the Soviet bloc aid and displaying pronounced Marxist tendencies.

The Sandinistas, he said, "are probably not all Marxist-Leninists, but they're certainly putting a Leninist form of government in Nicaragua as fast as they can."

However, "The people in the NSC during the Carter time did not want this reported" in the CIA's National Intelligence Daily lest it outrage Congress, which was still voting aid to Nicaragua.

The CIA refused to suppress its findings, he said, but agreed to a compromise that restricted publication to a more limited-circulation typewritten report.

Horton also said his quarrel with Casey and other administration officials is not simply that they resist discussion of unpalatable "soft" or "pragmatic" options toward Nicaragua. The intelligence services and national decision-making would be just as poorly served by an administration that refused to consider "tough" options, he said.

However, he also praised Casey for rebuilding the CIA after budget, function and personnel cuts during the Carter administration.

Many of America's problems in Latin Central America, he argued, result from a diminished presence of intelligence officers, diplomatic personnel, military attaches and U.S. Information Agency officers.

During the tenure of Carter administration CIA chief Stansfield Turner, "our (CIA) station in San Salvador was closed down completely, for economy reasons," Horton said.

Such non-partisan criticism, he cheerfully admitted, reflects "my own institutional bias. As an intelligence officer, I don't work for an admininstration, I work for the government."

Horton also cheerfully said his resignation required "no sacrifice," he is "no martyr," since he merely resumed life as a retired CIA official. Aside from admiring his grandchildren, his only current duty is harvesting the crop of red grapes at his Maryland home.

In his CIA career, however, Horton's duties included recruiting spies from the ranks of disaffected Soviets and East Germans, running CIA missions in Mexico City and Montevideo, Uruguay, and rising to the post of deputy chief of the Latin American Division at the CIA's Langley, Va., headquarters.

His work has earned him the Distinguished Intelligence Medal.

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# 'Covert plots' described as small part of CIA

By CLARK T. IRWIN JR.
Staff Writer

For a lot of people — including some congressmen — the phrase "CIA operations" conjures up images of assassinations, clandestine armies and sinister plots.

Those "covert operations," such as the famous plan to slip Fidel Castro a poisoned cigar, "are the most discussed, but probably the least important of all," according to retired CIA officer John R. Horton.

Horton served in the CIA from 1948 to 1975, returning to duty in 1983 to supervise preparation of intelligence estimates for Latin American countries.

He participated in covert operations during that career: recruiting East German spies and monitoring Cuban and Soviet links to the American peace movement from his Mexico City post during the Johnson and Nixon administrations, for instance.

He has served in the Philippines and Japan and was "chief of station" in Hong Kong, Montevideo and Mexico City; "Espionage and counter-espionage was mostly what we did."

However, "The CIA, as far as I know, has never assassinated anybody," Horton said.

"But there were a lot of assassination plans that did not originate with the CIA. They originated with John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and so on down the line," Horton said.

"They were more than contingency (plans)," he said. Various political leaders "wanted people killed, like Castro, Lumumba" — the latter reference being to the late Patrice Lumumba, a Congolese war leader of the early 1960s.

But such plans are a minor part of the CIA's duties, Horton noted. "The greatest number, by far" of CIA employees work in Washington and are concerned with the agency's other three roles:

- Intelligence-gathering, whether from spies, conversations, satellite photos, communications monitoring or reading other nations' newspapers and technical journals.
- Intelligence analysis, or evaluating the information.
- Producing national intelligence estimates that synthesize information on particular countries to judge capabilities and intentions of interest to U.S. policy.

The CIA gets the most press, Horton noted, but the largest American intelligence operation is the National Security Agency, which specializes in codes and electronic intelligence-gathering. The Defense Department, the armed forces, the FBI and even the Commerce and Treasury Departments also have intelligence sections.

Whether the United States should indulge in covert or paramilitary operations may simply reflect the political tastes of a particular administration, Horton said.

But all modern American administrations have supported basic espionage and counter-espionage efforts.

"If we had open societies around the world," Horton said, "there probably wouldn't be any need for espionage, for secrecy."

In the meantime, he added, the only way to determine whether countries like the Soviet Union are abiding by arms control treaties, for example, is to spy on them.

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